

## **VIRGINIA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING COUNCIL**

### ***Summary of Session One Held on June 15, 2005***

#### **Introduction**

Paul Hirschbiel and Rob Dugger, Co-Chairs of the Early Childhood Learning Council, convened the first meeting of the Council, providing a welcome to participants and a brief explanation of the goals and outcomes for the meetings.

During a time of introductions participants provided not only their name and position, but also spoke to the items shown below, with their comments summarized briefly as follows:

- An important aspect of their early childhood experiences contributing to their success:
  - Family factors
    - A warm and loving family environment, provided by parents and/or grandparents actively involved in the child's life
    - Parental encouragement of early learning and literacy, including reading to children at an early age and exposure to a variety of experiences and discussion of a variety of topics
    - An emphasis on education, with high expectations for academic success
    - Personal affirmation
    - Promotion of social skills, both through parental training and interactions with siblings, relatives, and friends
  - Educational experiences
    - Encouragement, affirmation, and high expectations exhibited toward them by one or more of their teachers
    - One-on-one mentoring by an educator
    - Participation in Head Start or other early educational programs
- A conviction or concern compelling their participation in the Early Childhood Learning Council
  - The desire to see *all* children realize their full potential, and dismay that many children do not develop their capabilities fully;
  - A passionate conviction that education, beginning in the early years, provides the foundation for success in life;
  - A strong belief that prevention is preferable to treatment or correction; that there is a heavy cost in waiting until problems are apparent;
  - The observation that children who arrive at school poorly prepared place great stress on the educational system, and that schools benefit when children participate in pre-K or other early educational programs;
  - A perception that many families are at risk in today's society;
  - A conviction that the Council provides an opportunity to bring early childhood issues back to the table (some of which were explored some years ago, but did not come to fruition.)

#### **Content presentation**

Prior to the meeting, participants had received several summaries of information on the importance of the early years. In addition to this material, the meeting included video clips of Governor James Hunt, researcher Dr. Craig Ramey, and economist Art Rolnick, as well as observations offered by the facilitator. In summary, all of these sources emphasize the conviction that offering high quality early childhood services is

- ❑ An superb educational strategy, providing the foundation necessary for academic success and reducing the potential for academic failure, retention, and special education services;
- ❑ A highly effective economic development strategy, offering high return on investment, a source of employment and income for many adults, a critical piece of the economic infrastructure, and a foundation for a well-prepared future workforce;
- ❑ An early opportunity to reduce the propensity for criminal behavior, as well as poor social and emotional skills;
- ❑ An approach which fits well with traditional American values for strong families, educational excellence, equality, and civic engagement.

Additionally, the content presentation outlined a comprehensive, multi-system approach to meeting the needs of children and designed to encourage all aspects of kindergarten readiness:

- ❑ Approaches to learning; curiosity; motivation
- ❑ Cognitive development
- ❑ Language development
- ❑ Social and emotional development
- ❑ Physical development

Research on child care has found that *quality matters*, with high quality being related to improved achievement in language and math, as well as behavior. Such quality includes sufficient teacher education; low adult-child ratios; small group sizes; well-designed curriculum activities and adequate materials; low teacher turnover; and adequate compensation for staff, as well as other factors. Unfortunately, research has also found that most child care is poor to mediocre in quality.

Given the need for comprehensive services, most states have emphasized the importance of participation from multiple sectors, which become engaged in public-private partnerships, leading to collaborative planning and implementation of well-coordinated services, with effective governance and oversight, as well as a strong emphasis on measuring results to ensure accountability.

### **Response and preliminary suggestions**

As one participant exclaimed “This all seems so obvious! Who are the possible opponents of efforts to expand early childhood services?” A discussion followed, with recognition of such constraints or concerns as

- ❑ Competition for scarce dollars, needed to fund many good services and programs;
- ❑ The historical emphasis, particularly among conservatives, on family privacy and parental responsibility for young children, with possible fears of government intrusion or interference in family life—a fact that needs to be addressed sensitively, by framing early childhood efforts as a way of supporting strong families and assisting parents in caring well for their children;
- ❑ Insufficient collaboration among early childhood advocates, to ensure coordination of effort and unified messages;
- ❑ A lack of public understanding of the importance of early childhood, the nature of quality programming, and the cost of failing to provide services;
- ❑ The importance of developing clear and effective measurement of outcomes, to demonstrate the benefits of intervening early.

Participants then worked in small groups to begin moving toward preliminary suggestions for a statewide early childhood effort. Discussion focused on the following questions, with responses summarized below:

- ❑ **What vision do you hold for Virginia's children?**
  - All children will develop their full potential, prepared for lifelong success.
  - The well-being of young children will be a state priority.
  - Virginia will develop a culture of providing opportunities for children to learn, a "learning ecology."
  - All children will enter school healthy.
  - Families and educators will hold high expectations for children.
  - Children will be confident in their abilities, will have respect for self and others, and will be encouraged to develop their creativity.
  - Programs will be inclusive, available to and effective for all children.
  
- ❑ **What do you see as the most important focus of work to improve outcomes for children?**
  - Virginia will maximize all sources of funding for services to children (local, state, and federal) and will successfully coordinate the provision of services.
  
- ❑ **What would be your top 3-5 priorities in creating a system of services to ensure that children develop well?**
  - The system of services will engage and educate parents, offering the support parents need in their role of providing care and education for their children.
  - The system of services will include *all* children, with a particular emphasis on the first 33 months of life.
  - All children will have access to high quality early childhood education and families will have a choice of excellent programs from which to choose.
  - Early childhood educational programs will meet uniform curriculum standards, in order to measure success and ensure kindergarten readiness.
  - All children will have access to health care.
  - There will be an effective public awareness effort to build public will in support of early childhood work.
  - There will be identified performance measures to ensure accountability of the systems work.
  
- ❑ **What indicators of success(results) would you like to see measured for this work?**
  - There will be a zero waiting list for quality child care.
  - Parents will be actively engaged.
  - There will be an improvement in measurements of school readiness.
  - Third grade test scores will improve.
  - More businesses will have policies and practices which are family and child-care friendly.
  - The financial impact of the programs will be measured.
  - *Over the long haul:* There will be reduction in school drop out figures, in the numbers of people being incarcerated, and in the cost of treatment/intervention services.

### **Next steps**

The next meeting of Virginia's Early Childhood Learning Council will be held on **July 11, from noon until 4:00**. At this meeting, the Council will receive information on indicators of child well-being in Virginia, services currently available to Virginia's children and families, gaps/challenges/limitations in such services, and approaches to changing policies in order to improve services. The council will then actively work on preliminary recommendations for moving forward with early childhood systems work.